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Mover and Shaker

Andy McCue

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Walter O'Malley, the Dodgers, & Baseball's Westward Expansion

Andy McCue

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Set in Ehrhardt by Renni Johnson.
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To Bernadette Kenney McCue and Seanacchie Kenney Jackie Robinson McCue, because I promised them after the first book. And to Mary Colleen Kenney, for always and everything.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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Introduction | Hitler, Stalin, Walter O'Malley

Jack Newfield told of the time he was having dinner with Pete Hamill, another Brooklyn-born luminary of the New York literary scene. "We began to joke about collaborating on an article called, 'The Ten Worst Human Beings Who Ever Lived.' And I said to Pete, 'Let's try an experiment. You write on your napkin the names of the three worst human beings who ever lived, and I will write the three worst, and we'll compare.' Each of us wrote down the same three names in the same order: Hitler, Stalin, Walter O'Malley."[1] It was a tale often repeated down the years, eliciting gleeful approval from diehard Brooklyn fans and an uneasy feeling about perspective from others. By the most recent accounting, Adolf Hitler killed 11 million people and Joseph Stalin murdered 6 million.[2] O'Malley moved a baseball team.

Walter O'Malley has been defined in great part by a group with large reason to hate him—the fans of the baseball team he moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles and the newspaper reporters who covered that team. Given the number of Brooklynites in the 1950s, it was inevitable that some of them became very talented polemicists. As new generations of reporters and fans came along, the caricature had been defined.

Through the early 1950s Walter O'Malley would generally be presented positively by New York writers, who found him refreshing after Branch Rickey. But with his decision to transplant the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles, all that changed. More than twenty years later, he was "a political wheeler-dealer, a smoker of big, long cigars, a man who had greased the way for the exile of Branch Rickey to Pittsburgh. A roly-poly type, his thick eyebrows and accentuated speech pattern suggested the kind of person who would foreclose mortgage payments on a widow and four children."[3]

"Greedy" would almost become part of his name for the New York partisans. It was not only journalists such as Dick Young of the *Daily News*. It was professors writing for an academic audience.[4] In articles and books, the caricature would be reaffirmed.

It was in part the tyranny of "the clips." News organizations all keep records of what they have reported. In Walter O'Malley's day, news organizations meant newspapers, and their librarians clipped out copies of all the day's stories and sorted them by topic into manila folders. The manila folders were known as "the clips." If something was in there, you could trust it, because it had been printed and had not drawn a squawk big enough to cause a correction. Otherwise, the correction would be in the manila folder as well.

To Walter O'Malley, correcting a reporter's facts was less important than keeping a good relationship with the team's major source of free publicity. Reporters who covered the Dodgers said he would argue with them about the tone or thrust of a story, especially in the early years, but rarely disputed factual inaccuracies, unless they touched on some hot button such as profits. Keeping reporters in the proper frame of mind was more important than a misunderstood anecdote. Fred Claire, a Dodgers public relations type in the 1960s and 1970s, recalled taking what he thought was an unfair newspaper portrayal to O'Malley's office. "Fred," he recalled the owner saying, "never stop to get into a tiff. Keep the big picture in mind."[5]

Thus, many "facts" about Walter O'Malley were reported again and again. Even the most respected newspapers in the business would repeat incorrect information. The *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *New York Daily News*, and *Sporting News* all had mistakes in their obituaries, either from "the clips" or from Walter O'Malley's entry in *Who's Who in America*.[6] Subsequent descriptions of O'Malley would pick up information from these stories, and new links in the chain of "facts" would be forged.

It is not like O'Malley was blameless in this process. "Remember," Walter O'Malley said to Roger Kahn, "only half the lies the Irish tell are true."[7] Like his entry in *Who's Who*, a good deal of the erroneous information about O'Malley came from himself. Maybe he was blatantly gilding things, or maybe he implied something and let the reporter gild it for him.

For that reason this book has a lot of endnotes. I believe everything in this book is either a fact, or, if it isn't, you can figure out where I found it. If it is an opinion, you will know where I found that. The book is also full of endnotes because people I wished to interview deferred to the O'Malley

family's desires. I spoke with Walter's children, Peter O'Malley and his sister, Terry Seidler, near the beginning of my research and asked for their cooperation. They declined, which is their privilege. But, I discovered, quite a number of people with ties to Walter O'Malley's story remain connected to the Dodgers or the family. When I called for an interview, they checked with Peter, and, according to several, Peter asked them not to talk to me. Most did not. The book is poorer for that.

To the outside world Walter O'Malley remained opaque. Roger Kahn described him as "an earth force lightly filtered through a personality."[8] In public he could be a backslapper. He loved a drink and a party but he never seemed to get drunk, and many who worked for and against him could not figure out what made him tick. His personal papers have never been fully made public, and the one author who has seen more than anyone else also remarked on how few things in the papers revealed the inner man.[9]

Even in baseball circles he was not the typical executive. He was a businessman, not someone who had grown up in the game or migrated from the field to the front office. He had barely played, even as a boy. He had become a season ticket holder only when it made business sense. He came to baseball as a lawyer with experience resurrecting troubled businesses.

Why a biography of O'Malley? Because he changed the game, from a parochial midsize business anchored in the Northeast United States to a national, and then an international, game earning and spending billions. In December 1999, as news organizations looked back on the twentieth century, the *Sporting News* named him the eleventh most powerful person in sports for the era. ABC Sports said he was the eighth most powerful off-the-field sports figure of the century. Marvin Miller, his intellectual opponent and sometime friend, called him "the most rational businessman I know."[10]

By 1957, when the Dodgers moved west, the Boston Braves (to Milwaukee), the St. Louis Browns (to Baltimore), and the Philadelphia Athletics (to Kansas City) had already moved. Horace Stoneham took his New York Giants to San Francisco the same time O'Malley moved the Dodgers. In the next few years, the Braves moved again, this time to Atlanta. The expansion Seattle Pilots traveled to Milwaukee after one year of incompetence on and off the field, in part to resolve a lawsuit caused by the Braves' departure for Atlanta. The Kansas City Athletics went to Oakland. The Washington Senators moved to Minneapolis–St. Paul. The team that replaced them, also called the Washington Senators, moved to Dallas–Fort Worth.

Only the most dedicated baseball fans could name the owners of these teams. But you have heard of Walter O'Malley. Books have been written condemning him. His name is a curse on the lips of many New Yorkers. Even people in Los Angeles view him with cynicism as the man who opened a brand-new stadium without drinking fountains to encourage sales of beer and soft drinks.

Why the difference? Why are Lou Perini, Bob Short, and William Daley known only to a small baseball-saturated audience, while Walter O'Malley can cause lips to curl and fingers to point on both coasts? Unlike the others Walter O'Malley was making a lot of money when he moved. He played his cards close to the vest and left many in New York believing he had no real intention of staying in Brooklyn. His professed desire to remain in New York, they say, was no more than a man attempting to up the ante from Los Angeles.

Perhaps more important, O'Malley's move was a sign that New York's reign as the unchallenged first city of the country, indeed of the world, might be in doubt. The team was lost from a satellite part of the city, but it was lost to a city challenging New York in size and importance to the country. The team was lost, in major part, because the byzantine politics of New York City could not broker an issue that was of paramount importance to one geographical subunit and of minimal interest to the others.

Although the move from New York is the ball bearing on which most people's knowledge of Walter O'Malley's life turns, there was much more to the man. He was a major force in moving Major League Baseball (MLB) from a group of sixteen teams clustered in the Northeast and encrusted in the business practices of the turn of the century to an international grouping of twenty-six franchises, competing fiercely for entertainment dollars and constantly searching for new ways to sell the product. He was a hard-headed businessman in a world of economic playboys more interested in baubles or ways to get their very rich names into the papers.

For almost three decades he was the most influential man in the game, although he did not always get his way. As such he was the man who sat at the table while television began to dictate to the game, from longer breaks between innings for more commercials to night games at the World Series. He was there for three rounds of expansion, the institution of the amateur draft, the split into divisions, and the creation of multiple rounds of playoffs.

When he entered the game teams controlled players' contracts like so many medieval serfs, whose average salary was about $13,000 a year. When

he died players were much closer to freedom, and the enormous increase in their salaries reflected that; the average salary was now around $180,000. Walter O'Malley's organization was the one that handed Miller the chisel he used to pry open the vault of free agency.

All this became part of the collective portrait of a man who is often caricatured as a greedy, fat, grinning, cigar-twirling Scrooge McDuck. He was occasionally all of those things, but he was never that caricature. A more sympathetic cartoonist would have painted a generous, benevolent, charming, thoughtful man who was above all concerned about his family, for, at times, he was all of those as well.

He was a man whose hard-hearted ways were a byword. He was a man who ignored his father's orders not to marry the girl next door after cancer forced the removal of her larynx, and thus her voice. He was a man who traded Maury Wills for defying an order. He was a man who employed Roy Campanella for life after the veteran catcher was crippled in an auto accident. He was a man who knew everybody who counted in New York and couldn't get what he wanted. He was a man who complained he couldn't figure out who the boss was in Los Angeles and got everything he dreamed of.